Family Preservation and Reintegration for Offenders

Paul Robinson, Michelle Hocking, Tony Moore, Allison Jones and Mark Sedgwick

Paul Robinson is Assistant General Manager, Custodial, South Australia; Michelle Hocking is Senior Operations Officer, Custodial, Northern Territory; Tony Moore is Prison Operations Manager, Custodial, Victoria; Allison Jones is Manager State Plan Projects, Offender Services, New South Wales and Mark Sedgwick is Assistant Superintendent – Prison Management, Western Australia.

"You know they say my crime is victimless crime, okay? Because it’s conspiracy to commit, it’s nothing that I overly did. It was not an action that I committed. But you know what? There are victims, my parents, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law, and my four children. There are victims because I’m not there to help them through any education. I’m not there to give them their loving, nurturing that children deserve at tender ages. Even at 21, 22 they will still need mom’s guidance. And you know my parents depended on me to do a lot of things."

(Mary, female prisoner aged 40 in Mauruna and Immarigeon, p. 272, 2004)

Introduction

A key challenge for correctional managers is the successful reintegration and preservation of family relationships for prisoners. This paper outlines significant issues relating to the challenges faced by families who are affected by imprisonment. Through a literature review, current international trends were identified and contrasted with practice in the following jurisdictions in Australia: – Australian Capital Territory (ACT), Victoria, Western Australia (WA) and New South Wales (NSW). In conclusion, strategic recommendations for further action are presented.

Research Methodology

The research was conducted by five industry experts utilizing the following methods:

• Literature review – an online search was made of current International and Australian research on the topic to determine trends;
• Case Studies – International and Australian models in current practice were examined to inform judgments about the identified trends; and
• Comparison - selected trends were studied to determine their similarities and differences across both Australian and international jurisdictions.

Family preservation and reintegration for offenders

Literature Review

It is important to support families with a member in prison to maintain contact and to re-establish family relationships upon release. Research shows as early as Hirschi (1969) that family attributes such as inadequate parental care, childhood experiences of criminal activity and dysfunctional family structures have an impact on criminal behavior, whereas positive family environments and attributes serve as protective factors against criminal behavior (Hirschi 1969, Farrington 2000). Studies have shown that prisoners who have greater contact with family during their incarceration have consistently more positive post-release outcomes than those who have little or no contact (Holt and Miller, 1972; Naser and Vigne, 2006). It has also been found that
imprisoning a parent increases the likelihood of their children becoming incarcerated by up to six times (VACRO 2006).

Imprisonment is recognized in the literature as having a profound effect on families. The detrimental effects of imprisonment on families is highlighted by data from the United Kingdom (Thames Family Partnership, 2008) which indicate that 30% of the children of prisoners suffer significant mental health problems compared to 10% of the general population; boys are twice as likely to become convicted offenders if their father has a criminal conviction, 43% of prisoners lose touch with their families during their sentence and 22% of those who were married prior to sentence became divorced or separated.

Imprisonment of a family member imposes significant burdens on families. There is considerable consistency between the few studies which have examined the social, financial, as well as personal (physical and psychological well being) effects. These include financial burdens such as the loss of income and housing stress as well as costs of contact such as travel, telephone and childcare (Codd, 2004). There are also emotional and social impacts such as hostility, loneliness and social isolation (Braman, 2002).

Families typically report difficulties booking visits, negative attitudes from officers and security requirements, the latter heightened by the widespread 'tough on crime' agenda and community safety fears. In addition, the inhospitable environment of many prison visit areas may be quite traumatic for visiting family members and limited visiting hours, lack of privacy and restricted physical conditions do little to support their efforts to stay connected.

Post release, ex-prisoners typically rely on their families for accommodation, food and emotional support (Naser & Vigne 2006; Lindquist et. al., 2009). Families face ongoing challenges such as renegotiating roles, dealing with resentment and unrealistic expectations and mental well being issues while often dealing with the relationship damage caused by the offender’s criminal lifestyle before incarceration (Naser & Vigne, 2006; VACRO, 2006).

Families of prisoners report reluctance to use mainstream services because of the stigma attached to imprisonment and the lack of understanding from service agencies regarding the negative impacts of incarceration (VACRO, 2006). The community is generally unaware of the difficulties that prisoners’ families face and there is little sympathy for their situation. Indeed, as one writer stated, there is a "...sense that these families are hardly families at all, that there is little we could do to manage them as they barely exist as families to begin with" (Braman, D., 2002, p. 252).

Across Australia, there appears to be a lack of systematic support to help families of prisoners cope with this major disruption in their lives. In the literature, several authors argued for a whole-of-government approach to the families of prisoners (Summary Report ACT Community Inclusion Board 22 April 2008). However, numerous barriers to maintaining family relationships during incarceration are evident and the cumulative disadvantages they experience are largely left unaddressed because these families do not appear to be identified as the core business of any government department.

In Australia, research on families affected by incarceration or the role they play in assisting the family member transition from prison into the community is scarce. Available literature highlights the need for family policies within the justice system, recognising the impact of offending behavior and imprisonment of a parent on a child and for prisons to provide a family friendly environment that is conducive to rebuilding, renegotiating and maintaining
ongoing family relationships. The literature also notes that there are no reliable estimates of the extent of need regarding the children of prisoners because no formal statistical information has been collected in Australia (VACRO, 2006).

**Australian and International Trends**

Currently, research identifies three major trends within correctional systems seeking to address family integration and preservation issues. These are: programs to strengthen families’ skills and capacity to cope; family friendly visits; use of technology to facilitate communication.

**Programs**

One example of the types of program approaches aimed at supporting family reintegration and preservation is ‘The Family Matters’ program, initiated by the Thames Valley Partnership, for the United Kingdom’s National Offender Management System (NOMS) pathway on strengthening family ties. This program enables the families of offenders and prisoners to be supported through:

- Improving access to support and provision of information and resources to these families;
- Integrating the work of the criminal justice agencies and family and children’s services in support of these vulnerable families;
- Strengthening relationship ties of prisoners to aid their re-integration into their family and community where appropriate;
- Specific courses to facilitate and strengthen family related skills such as parenting skills.

Another program used in the United Kingdom to support family preservation for prisoners is ‘Story Book Dads’ (Graham, H., 2010). In this program, fathers in prison are provided the opportunity to read and record stories for their children, thereby supporting their children’s education and strengthening their own parenting skills. This program has linkages to similar programs in Australia such as ‘Reading Together’ (Duncan, S., 2009). Currently operating in the Tasmanian Prison Service, ‘Reading Together’ utilizes literacy tutors to support the imprisoned parent to record stories onto a compact disc and send the disc along with the book to their children.

**Family friendly visits**

In Europe, there is widespread use of private visits, also known as intimate or conjugal visits, for recognised established couples. To the uninformed, these visits may be perceived to be only about sexual intercourse. However, it is generally recognised that private visits assist with the preservation of family bonds and increase the chances of success for a prisoner’s reintegration into the community by allowing normal human interactions to occur without the intrusion of other observers. Additionally, the incentive of a private visit means that prisoners are strongly motivated to comply with rules and regulations and they consciously avoid any infringement which may jeopardize their visit. There are many countries worldwide, including Brazil, Canada, Cuba, Denmark, France, Ireland, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom and United States (Wikipedia 8 August, 2010) currently have a private visit program available for prisoners, ranging in duration from 3 to 72 hours. In Australia the only two states to date who have a private visit program are Victoria and ACT. In 2009, ACT extended its private visits program to include same sex couples.

Other widely used strategies that respond to the needs of families include initiatives such as family days, with activities and opportunities for families to have fun together. Many correctional systems also support playgroups for children of prisoners, such as those run by ‘Shine for..."
Use of technology for prisoners to communicate

For families who are unable to visit a family member in prison because of distance, cost, sickness or other difficulties, technology may provide the solution. In Australia, Webcam and Audio Visual link are used in WA and NSW to facilitate remote access to family visits, reducing stress and costs associated with traveling. In NSW ‘Shine for Kids’ in conjunction with Corrective Services NSW identifies local community venues such as a library, TAFE or health centre with video conferencing equipment for the family to access the video equipment (website Shine for Kids). Internationally, Singapore’s maximum security correctional facility at Changi, one of Asia’s most high-tech jails, utilizes Audio Visual technologies to not only make it more secure and efficient but also to facilitate family contact (Hicks, R., 2010).

In some United States prisons, prisoners use basic email systems to electronically communicate to an approved list of contacts. While some critics believe that email is a privilege that shouldn’t be afforded to inmates, others praise it for allowing more communication between prisoners and their families. They see it as a way for children to sustain a relationship with an imprisoned parent, or as a means for families to communicate urgent news (good or bad) with their loved one. This use of technology to assist families bridge the communication gap between them and a family member in prison is not a one off pilot. According to USA Today, "...by spring of 2011, all 114 U.S. prisons are expected to have email available for inmates."

Conclusion

This research has highlighted the strong interconnection between prisoners and their families. There are huge impacts on families when a member is imprisoned and there is a growing recognition of the role that families play in supporting offenders to lead crime free lives.

A whole of government approach is needed to support family reintegration and preservation for prisoners, particularly around: absentee parenting; crises contact; family conferencing, planning, negotiating; and reunification planning.

There is also a need for a cross jurisdictional approach to develop policy and procedures to establish national best practice standards relating to issues such as private visits, phone or video link contact, appropriate facilities, access and information services and staff training.

Correctional systems across Australia must shift their focus from the prisoner alone and take into account the context of their family. "Indeed, it could be argued that the whole conception of prisoners’ families is flawed, in that it focuses on the prisoner, rather than the family.” (Bobbitt, M. and Nelson, M., 2004 p.4).

Recommendations

1. Research the needs of families with a member in prison to develop a comprehensive understanding in the Australian context to facilitate effective service planning and delivery model.

2. Establish Australian ‘best practice’ standards for prison visit centers to address issues of interactions with custodial staff, booking systems, access and information services, least intrusive security requirements and appropriate resources such as phone or video link contact.
3. Facilitate greater contact between families and prisoners through technological means. There is great potential in the use of technology to remove barriers to family reintegration and preservation.

4. Develop across jurisdiction policies and procedures for private family visits to take account of families needs.

5. Support pre and post release programs that develop or strengthen relationship skills between prisoners and their families.

References:

'Children: Unintended Victims of legal process’ Discussion Paper June 2006, Flat Out Inc and the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO)


Farrington, D. Criminology, The concentration of offenders in families, and family criminality in the prediction of boys' delinquency, 2000.


The Urban Institute – Jail Re Entry Routable meeting Washington D. C. June 2006


http://www.storybookdadsandmums.co.uk/Annual%20Report%202009%20latest.pdf

Family preservation and reintegration for offenders